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## Social Risks and Challenges of the Post-Socialist Transition Period in Estonia: Analysis of Biographical Narratives

### **Abstract**

In research on social risks and insecurity qualitative methods have obvious advantages and successfully complement statistical quantitative approaches, which have been practiced for decades. This study is based on the thirty-two in-depth interviews collected in the period June 2003 to January 2004 for the project “Life Plans and Life Paths in the Post-Socialist Estonia.” The interviewees are representatives of the so-called “generation of winners”, i.e. the people aged 20 or 30 years at the beginning of the period of post-socialist reforms. The paper examines representations of social risks and challenges of the transition period in the biographical interviews as well as discursive patterns and strategies that interviewees use to produce relatively coherent biographical narratives.

### **Keywords**

Post-Socialist Transition; Generation of Winners; Social Risks; Biographical Narratives; Discourse Analysis

In Estonia as in other post-Soviet countries, the transition to a market economy opened new opportunities—such as private enterprise and self-employment—yet it also engendered new risks, such as unemployment, decline of social status, and pauperization. Such risks and opportunities were unevenly distributed among different groups in the general population. As has been noted repeatedly, changes in the former socialist countries entailed a transition from the old-age-oriented society to a new, youth-oriented one. Young age became a particularly important factor of social success in the early 1990s. Presuming their success in the job market, people aged 20-30 years at the beginning of the period of post-socialist reforms have been called the cohort of “winners” (Titma, Tuma and Silver 1998). Further sociological analysis, however, has shown that not all of the “winners” have been successful, and that the cohort actually includes a considerable number of “losers” (Helemäe et al. 2000).

Our paper examines how this “generation of winners” represents social changes of the 1990s and their impact on people’s lives, as well as how “winners” cope with

social failure and manage their identity in disruptive circumstances of post-socialist reforms and transition to a market economy. The paper relies on data from the study “Life Plans and Life Paths in the Post-socialist Estonia: Life Stories of the Generation of Winners,” a collection of personal interviews from 2003–2004 that examines representations of what is perceived as social failure and insecurity in these biographical interviews. We proceed in our examination from the main premise of critical discourse studies: that discourse is a mode of social action and, as such, forms a mobile interface between language and society. In response to social changes and uncertainty, individuals tend to develop discursive and behavioral patterns to manage risks and challenges, to cope with the new socio-economic situation, and to overcome the constraints the situation imposes on them (see, e.g., Zinn 2005). In the first section of our paper we offer a survey of the period of social changes in Estonia as well as potential risks and challenges the respondents from the generation of “winners” may have encountered. From there we move to concentrate on the biographical interviews from “Life Plans,” analyzing discursive patterns and strategies formed in response to social challenges.

### **Transition period in Estonia**

A high degree of liberalism and a modest role of state were characteristic of the economic reforms in the period of transition to a market economy. Estonia is often used as an example of successful development, especially compared to other post-socialist countries (World Bank 1996). On the other hand, the Estonian “history of success” is criticized because of increasing social inequality and deepening tensions between generations and economic sectors as time passes (Estonian Human Development Report 1997).

In Estonia as in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, transition to a market economy was accompanied by a considerable reduction of the labor market and changes in the distribution of income (World Bank 2002). The employment rate was steadily declining from 1989 and during the whole period of the 1990s. Work was neither compulsory nor guaranteed, as it was in the Soviet era, when finding a job was relatively easy and full employment was actually achieved. The state’s ultraliberal post-socialist economic policy provoked the growth of unemployment. In just a few years unemployment became the everyday reality rather than an abstract phenomenon for many people. According to data from the Estonian department of statistics, the unemployment rate among the able-bodied population was at its highest point (14%) in 2000 and 10% in 2004 (Labour Force 2005). The process of the transformation of Estonian society had modified the means for seeking employment: the rate of jobs found via official channels was steadily decreasing, whereas the role of informal connections in securing employment became increasingly important. Increased difficulty in finding a job without informal mediation is a symptom of the impending closure of labour market, a situation typical of other post-socialist countries as well (Kazjulja 2002; Clarke 2000). Taking into account the changes in the sphere of employment, the state obviously prioritized economic growth over development of social support systems, which led to heightened social insecurity and susceptibility of the population to social risks like unemployment and pauperization.

The economic transition in Estonia engendered opportunities as well as risks, though both were distributed rather unevenly across different groups of the population. The unequal distribution of risks and opportunities can be usefully

explained with the help of the path-dependency theory, which argues that different “capitals” and capacity to convert them according to new social and economic rules determine individuals’ and groups’ positions within the stratification system of transforming societies. In a changing economic situation, people use capital already accumulated in the previous political and economic systems in new ways, since accumulation of a new capital requires time, as one type of capital might have been converted into another. In post-Soviet Estonia, for example, the political elite of the Soviet era had an opportunity to convert their political power into economic capital (Rona-Tas 1998). Being in the “right place” at the beginning of reforms was an important factor of success. Since the labor market was strongly segmented in the Soviet time, the structural capital—the individual’s place in the structure of economy—determined an individual’s prospects in the labor market. Those who worked in large state companies like plants and factories were the first to be affected by unemployment and/ or decline in social status as the economic structure changed. These people, mainly Russian-speaking and thus the main ethnic minority of Estonia, did not have sufficient individual resources, such as citizenship or knowledge of the state language, to succeed in the new labor market. In their case, the risks of market economy prevailed over any new opportunities. Meanwhile, leaders and specialists, who had more opportunities to use and convert their social and cultural capital, were less susceptible to unemployment due to their former, Soviet-era professional status.

Youth became a particularly valuable capital in the early 1990s, and the advantage of gradual accumulation of life experience was rather underestimated. Changes in generational influence occurred in both state structures and the economy. New enterprises were set up and directed chiefly by young people (Tallo & Terk 1998: 15). As we have already mentioned, people aged 20-30 years at the beginning of the period of reforms have been called the cohort of “winners” because of their successful careers and the society’s propensity to see youth as an advantage (Titma, Tuma and Silver 1998).

“Winners” success in the labor market has been often related to the timing of their entry into it (Helemäe et al 2000). At the beginning of the period of reform, representatives of the cohort were either close to high school graduation or at the very beginning of their careers. Their experience of work in the framework of the old Soviet system was minimal or non-existent and, consequently, they were more apt to take new business and entrepreneurial opportunities than older workers. Legal regulation of the business sphere was weak, and the market was not yet competitive in the beginning of the transition period. Thanks to these favorable conditions, representatives of the younger cohort were able to better orient themselves in the new market situation in comparison to older generations, who had a longer experience of working in the planned economy. Sociological research has shown that the victory of the generation of “winners” has been relative, however, and that the cohort of “winners” in fact includes a considerable number of “losers” (Helemäe et al. 2000). These individuals have encountered significant financial hardships, and have experienced and continue to experience social insecurity, in some cases living at or near poverty level.

Today Estonia is a country with a developed market economy. Though comparable to other countries with middle range income, it occupies a modest position among them. At least with respect to the level of incomes, Estonia is closer to the poorer countries than to the richer ones. Due to the recent positive changes in the Estonian economy, such as growth of employment, increase of wages, pensions, allowances and, what most important, the real incomes of the population, the rate of people living in and at risk of poverty has considerably diminished. Still, 2004 data

from the Estonian department of statistics shows that incomes of a large part of the population do not exceed the absolute poverty line (In 2004, a person on monthly income less than 106 euro was recognized as living under the poverty line). Thus, in 2004, every sixth resident of the country, every seventh family and a quarter of all children lived under the officially recognized line of poverty (Household Living Niveau 2004, 2005: 67). Non-working members of the family—the unemployed, children, those who have caring responsibilities for children or disabled people, pensioners whose pension is minimal—are more susceptible to poverty (Trumm 2005). Other risk factors such as a low level of education or disability resulting from illness further increase the general risk of family poverty.

Estonia ranks among those countries in which strategies facilitating the rise of the economy did not lead to a decline in poverty (Heinrich, G 2003). Along with traditionally vulnerable groups (single mothers, families with a large number of children, non-working pensioners etc.), the radical reforms conducted in Estonia from the beginning of state independence affected social groups that found themselves immediately living under the poverty line in the new economic system—the unemployed and underpaid, for instance. The so-called “new poor” are able-bodied people often at the peak of their abilities, not necessarily unemployed, yet not earning enough to maintain a decent standard of living. As a result of growing differentiation of incomes, increase in *relative* poverty occurs: a number of people grow poorer in respect to relatively prosperous groups and new opportunities.

## Data and methods

Our article is based on data from a project conducted in Estonia near the turn of the twenty-first century—“Life Plans and Life Paths in the Post-socialist Estonia: Life Stories of the Generation of Winners”—which was supported by the Estonian Science Foundation. Our analysis is based on the thirty-two in-depth interviews collected in the period June 2003 to January 2004 for “Life Plans.” The sample of respondents was drawn from a longitudinal study “Life Paths of a Generation” (PG), launched in 1983 when a research group from the University of Tartu and the Estonian Academy of Sciences, under the leadership of Professor Mikk Titma, interviewed graduates from secondary educational institutions (see for example Titma et al 1998). PG observed the life course of a specific cohort from secondary school graduation until the end of the 1990s.

The PG cohort were educated in the Soviet system in the mid- and late 1980s, and entered labor market in the early 1990s, in the period of reforms accompanied by the growth of inequality, devaluation of choices made before the reforms, necessity of adaptation to the new system, and social stress (see e.g. Kutsar 1995). Because the PG cohort were approximately 24-26 years old by the beginning of 1990s and were the most advanced cohort in terms of education, we considered longitudinal data to provide time-dependent information on the inner differentiation of the ‘winners of transition’ and the factors that led them to failure or success. In this paper, we use the method of discourse analysis to examine processing of social and biographical data by the interviewees.

We proceed from the main premise of critical discourse studies: that discourse forms a mobile interface between language and society. Social representations become fixed in discourse in the course of social interaction. The network of social representations—beliefs, attitudes and values—constitute the nodal points between language and other social practices (see e.g. van Dijk 2005: 301; van Dijk 1998: 4-

14). Social representations simultaneously mold people's perceptions and thinking, and reproduce and regulate social relations. Thus, discourse is important in both the production and the maintenance of social order (Corsaro 1985: 167).

The interviewees from the generation of "winners" rarely describe social risks or social failure directly. The latter are most often conceptualized implicitly, via representation of social processes and the impact they have on people's lives and society. Interviewees foreground the factors that influence their own or other people's lives and lead to social success or failure. To describe and analyse these implicit representations we rely on the parameters developed in the framework of critical discourse analysis (e.g. van Dijk 1985, 1998, 2001, 2005; Fairclough 1995, 2001, 2003; Antaki 1984). They are: representation of social *processes* and *events* in discourse; representation of *agency* and *causality* (whether the processes are represented as functions of definite agents or as anonymous; the nature of agency and participation); *temporal organization* of the narrative and dependence of the temporal scheme on the interviewee's present situation (social success or failure); discourse *modality* and *evaluation* of events; *discursive positioning*; and construction of narrative *identity*. Ultimately, our aim is to study how social changes of the 1990s and the necessity of their narrativization affect social construction of the world by the generation of "winners"—that is, how the interviewees conceptualize social changes of the 1990s (events, processes and actors) as well as how they react to social challenges (threat of social failure and pauperization) and manage their social identities in these autobiographical narratives.

The work with respondents was conducted in the form of a semi-structured biographical interview. The interviewees were asked to narrate their life stories, starting from birth, with minimal intervention on interviewer's part. The latter's role was coordinating, drawing respondents' attention to the most significant biographical events, particularly the details of education and career. Essentially, the interviewer's task was to encourage respondents to talk and elaborate on what they had said.

The semi-structured interview is a joint production by interviewer and interviewee (Wengraf 2002: 3). The interviewer provides the respondent with thematic foci, drawing his/her attention to certain biographical facts or social events. The interviewee is relatively free in his/her selection and presentation of the material to fill in the framework suggested by the interviewer (Rosenthal 1993: 65). C. K Riessman reveals that interviewees sometimes resist interviewers' "efforts to fragment their lived experience into thematic (code-able) categories" and their "attempts to control meaning" (Riessman 2002: 695-696). However, the life-story originates in the social environment common for the interviewee and interviewer. An apparently spontaneous narrative obtained in the course of the interview is a result of implicit selection and interpretation of the events from the perspective of the present. Social constraints as well as collective representations accepted in the society influence respondents' speech and behavior; social structure "is constantly being reaffirmed and transformed in the interaction between biographical experience and socially defined schemata" (Rosenthal 1993: 60). Thus, the biographical interview combines spontaneous narration with implicit selection and codification. The interview conveys "tacit and unconscious assumptions and norms of the individual or of a cultural group," which "are less subject to the individual's conscious control" than direct statements, at least in some respects (Wengraf 2002: 115).



## **Analysis of biographical narratives**

The optimistic version of social consensus regarding the period of economic reforms in Estonia, propagated and supported by media, represents it as time of rapid and successful changes. It also stimulates negative stereotyping of social failure and poverty, which are seen as temporary phenomena that result partially from the shortcomings in social policy and partially from people's unwillingness or inability to adapt their lives to new social and economic conditions. Our analysis of the interviews seeks to show whether and to what extent respondents naturalize or problematize the social consensus. In what follows we shall make some observations on how the social situation of the 1990s is constructed in respondents' discourse with the emphasis on social risks and failure. Discourse analysis allows us to observe how people construct a coherent world view based on their understanding of events and phenomena.

### ***Representation of social agents and processes.***

The structural changes in society are foregrounded as kernel elements of the biographical narratives. Both relatively successful and relatively unsuccessful—in terms of career and income—respondents highlighted a crucial impact the structural changes had on their lives, as well as the radical character and wide scope of these changes, which affected nearly all strata of society.

Social events enter the narratives primarily as elements of biography rather than as separate phenomena of social world; their meaning varies within various biographical frames. Thus it is particularly significant that, though the period of changes has had a different impact on respondents' destinies and has been perceived differently, the majority of the biographical narratives display common narrative regularities and recurrent thematic patterns (*topics* and *subtopics*). According to van Dijk, "a concept or a conceptual structure (a proposition) may become a discourse topic if it hierarchically organizes the conceptual (propositional) structure of the sentence" (van Dijk 1977: 134). The topic of a discourse is a macroproposition that provides its local and global coherence (van Dijk 1985). We examine representations of the transition processes in terms of both *thematic constituents* (topics and subtopics) and *agency*. In narratology, subtopics (motifs) are defined as both elementary thematic constituents of discourse and minimal narrative units or statements: "the discourse can be said to state the story through a connected set of narrative statements" (Prince 2003: 55, 64). *Thematization* and representation of *agency* are the two basic factors of narrative dynamics.

In the "winners" biographical interviews, the transition period of the 1990s is generally thematized as a drastic change that enabled new choices, yet was accompanied by some kind of loss or social shock—whether temporary or continuing—such as loss of feeling of security, loss of property or reduction of income. The individual "emplotments" and subjective processing of information distinguish particular narratives even as they generally fall into this pattern (Gulich & Quasthoff 1985: 174), yet the topic of "destabilization" (destabilization leading either to further aggravation or relative stabilization and improvement of situation) is invariable. Insofar as interviewees conceptualize the transition process as potentially threatening their social stability and material prosperity, one may infer that social failure and pauperization are seen as plausible consequences of the process, which may affect everyone, rather than exclusive phenomena whose action applies only to

the perceived “lazy” or “worthless” members of society, as in the case of negative stereotyping of social failure and poverty.

As a rule, the precise nature and character of social transformations are not specified in the interviews. The biographical narrative typically emphasizes the *consequences* of social processes and impact they have on the respondent’s life, his or her relatives’ and acquaintances’ lives or the situation in the region, where they live, rather than the processes themselves.

The first example is taken from an interview with a relatively successful respondent who has graduated from the Tallinn Pedagogical Institute, holds the posts of director and supply manager in a village school, and finally becomes an owner of a small bus company. He is concerned about the privatization of land and property in the 1990s, which, when brought about without a clear plan or social protection measures, has turned to be damaging for the local life. The respondent avoids direct inferences, however, and makes instead a series of “remedial corrections” in his discourse to narrow down the scope of the process. Here we introduce the notion of “remedial correction” as a discursive component of the “remedial interchange,” which is aimed at impression management and transforming potentially offensive or consensus-breaking acts into socially acceptable ones to help the actor preserve his or her reputation (Goffman 1971: 109):

*Interviewer:* Had the big changes of the ‘90s changed your life as well?

*Interviewee:* Sure they did. I moved to this place in ‘89. Though I didn’t happen to see any political life here. Only on TV. Neither struggle for independence nor... even hadn’t a chance to go to the night song festivals. Here it all went its own way and rather quietly. Here I saw the collapse of the local life, I mean the collapse of the sovkhos [Soviet collective farm], and what people did then, there were different variants [of behavior] [...]

*Interviewer:* ...Hadn’t the collapse of the sovkhos emasculated it [the local life] here?

*Interviewee:* Let’s say, the sovkhos as an economy unit had totally emasculated itself... Whether it was good or bad, it might have continued as a production unit, but it was rather people’s mistake, I think. There are bad people everywhere... But perhaps it was right to sink it altogether, but, on the other hand, to distribute everything. The Otepää sovkhos preserved some production units, a pigsty, rather large, and a milk-herd. It continues as a private limited company. Some people keep on working there [...]. The rest of agriculture has been completely destroyed [...]

*Interviewer:* There are still nice places here.

*Interviewee:* Yes, the village is not desolated. Apartments prices are still high here [...] People are coming from everywhere, from Tallinn, and Swedes, and Finns. In this sense the local life had not collapsed.

In respondent’s narrative, the following subtopics constitute different types of “changes”: struggle for independence, night song festivals, collapse of the Soviet collective farms (sovkhoses) and “emasculatation” of local life. Only the last two subtopics refer to respondent’s immediate personal experience. The “collapse” and “destruction” are examples of negative thematization. The local consequences of the reform are represented in negative terms, but the reformation itself is conceptualized

as an anonymous process, without indicating the agents who might have been responsible for negative effects. This anonymity is intensified through nominalization and use of process nouns ('Local life collapsed'/ 'The collapse of local life'). Nominalization, i.e. representation of processes as entities, entails occultation of causal aspects and objectification of the process. As a result of nominalization, "the agents of processes, people who initiate processes or act upon other people or objects, are absent from texts" (Fairclough 2003: 12-13).

Further, due to rewording, the scope of collapse is narrowed down: it was only a sovkhos, not local life as a whole, that collapsed. In the next segment of discourse, a hypothetical generalized agent of the process is added ("bad people"); here, a socio-economical problem is represented as a moral one. The intransitive use of the verb "emasculate" in contrast to the transitive use of it in the interviewer's question is also noteworthy: it represents the process (emasculatation) as reflexive, turning back to itself. Finally, the scope of the process is narrowed down again as the interviewee points out that local life has not collapsed due to the development of tourism.

Passivation, nominalization, use of reflexive and intransitive verbs, generalized nouns and pronouns, indefinite adjectives are typical means of the anonymous representation of social processes and backgrounding of agency in the majority of interviews. The process of changes is most often represented as anonymous; its causes and agents are backgrounded or generalized (*all, everybody, nobody, they, etc.*).

*Interviewee* [male track driver]: [C]ollective farms *started falling apart* [...] I worked also for a rent company for several years. Then the land *return started*, and *everything collapsed* altogether. [here and throughout emphases added.- M.G., M.K.]

*Interviewee* [female teacher]: Then the Estonian Republic already *came into being*. And *everybody* left school [because of low wages]

*Interviewee* [female former veterinary doctor, works as a selling agent for a toy company]: Soon those changes *started to happen*, and it was impossible to keep fur animals any more and *everybody* was poor and [laughs] ... there was no food... and the company itself was on sell, on the verge of bankruptcy...

[On her work as a hotel supply manager]: [I]t was [an] awfully funny and edifying time [...] Yet the *salary was not paid* there.

*Interviewee* [male owner of a small company]: [W]e were a young family during the period of changes, and an opportunity to get our own place for living *disappeared* ...

*Interviewee* [male engineer]: In the 1990s, the whole state financed (as it always was) melioration system *disappeared* in Estonia [...] ... then the Estonian crone *came into being* and building work *stopped* in Estonia altogether for a while.

*Interviewee* [woman, orderly]: *I wasn't sacked*, I resigned. You know, it was the time when those companies *were privatized*, and things *fell apart*, so... *Salary wasn't paid*, I *was paid* only 130 per month. *One* had to reconcile *oneself* to it, there was no sense in doing this work.

*Interviewee* [male university research fellow]: [H]onestly speaking, the worst thing was that this Master's studies system *had been introduced* and



*nobody* knew what did *they* want. In my case the conditions were the same as for the doctor [PhD] today.

*Interviewee* [female laboratory assistant]: Of course, there were *redundancies* in the late '90s. Three times. But I've managed to stay.

*Interviewer*: Don't you fear to lose your job now? Do you fear more now than before?

*Interviewee*: On the contrary, *there is less fear* now. *It was more fear* of being fired before. Now *people* get so used to *redundancies* that they even don't care.

[... S]hould there be a *redundancy*, should Terko [the company] *collapse*, *one* would have to seek a job. But there are no jobs here.

*Interviewee* [female research fellow]: Then it *started... collapse* or *destruction*. According to the rumours from the institute that reached me, *all* younger *staff* quit the job.

*Interviewee* [male miner]: [A]nd then *it* [all] *collapsed* in '89-'90.. then I came here, to the town, to my brother, to work as a sanitarian technician in the building project. [...] And in 1992 the sanitarian technique company also... *everything was being reformed*. First there was a state company, then a cooperative [company], then the co-operative *fell apart* because the chairman left... then I lost my job.

Representation of social change as anonymous and suppression of agents naturalizes socio-economic processes and their negative effects and blocks analysis of the social situation and awareness of one's own position within it.

The social actor's role is reduced to either "benefiting from the situation" or "suffering from the situation." Social actors are represented as affected by the situation and being "at the receiving end" of the situation as Objects (Patients) or Beneficiaries (Leeuwen 2003: 44). As Beneficiaries they are those that "the opportunities are given to;" they act due to favorable opportunities. Beneficiaries may be activated as actor-participants, yet their secondary role in the process is always spotlighted: they can benefit from the situation, but they neither initiate nor control it. Here we consider Patient and Beneficiary as narrative roles. Similarly to the Greimassian actants, they belong to the deep level of narrative syntax and not to the surface linguistic structure.

When positioning themselves with respect to social action, interviewees often assume the role of the patient (*I was not paid, I was not sacked*, etc.) or beneficiary (*I was given an opportunity, they offered me a job*, etc.). On the other hand, both relatively "successful" and "unsuccessful" interviewees often implicitly refer to their inability or the impossibility of them benefitting from the new social situation in such a way that they become the active agents:

*Interviewee* [female shop manager]: I know that many people of our generation did well, *those who knew how to use* this time properly.

*Interviewee* [unemployed female]: When the large changes started to happen, everybody went to commerce. I mean merchandise, delivery...this shuttling didn't attract me. It was probably because I hadn't quick wits for something significant...to catch something elusive by tail... Since people with quick wits *were able to use favourable moments...*

The biographical topics common for both relatively successful and unsuccessful interviewees are the loss of one's command over circumstances, and exclusion from the process of decision-making in the course of social changes. As a rule, these topics refer to the lasting influence of suprapersonal factors on speaker's destiny. Exclusion from the sphere of decision-making as well as social success or failure are often attributed to the fatal powers beyond the respondent's control ("it just happened so;" "it came by itself, without any effort on my part;" "I was just lucky enough;" "it was bad luck;" etc.). The representation of social processes as anonymous and "agentless" propounds fatalistic explanations of events. Respondents tend to represent structural and individual factors as fated and/or endowed with a fatalistic meaning. In this case, agency is ascribed to suprapersonal powers.

The interviews show that there is no definite, univocal connection between recurrent biographical topics and their narrative resolutions, which shape the denouements of the biographical stories (social success or failure). Certain biographical topics and subtopics foregrounded by both successful and unsuccessful respondents (hard and intensive work, mobility or open-mindedness) may or may not lead to success as the narrative resolution. The fact that the same individual characteristic (e.g. mobility or open-mindedness) may become a factor of either success or failure reveals that social failure and poverty are represented as predominantly suprapersonal phenomena. There are examples of social mobility and effort (the respondent changes job, improves his/ her qualification or is retrained) that do not lead to promotion or improvement of respondents' situations. "Wrong" choices in the past that were not perceived as wrong at the time, representation of changes as too rapid and radical ("all that we were taught turned upside down"), fatigue from the reforms—all these motifs manifest the decrease of control over one's own life and point to the natural, physical and psychological limits of adaptation, including the finitude of human life.

As a result, certain conservatism or failure of adaptation, when considered against the neutral or negative thematization of "changes" and related motifs (effort, mobility, etc.), may acquire a positive meaning in the biographical interviews. Interviewees regard it as a manifestation of certain axiological values such as commitment to tradition and profession and a desire to preserve relative individual autonomy and command over one's own life.

### ***Social change and construction of temporality.***

Personal time always mediates social construction of temporality. There are different levels of the "negotiation of time" (Brockmeier 1995: 116) in personal narratives. Certain patterns of personal time perception tend to crystallize into social time patterns.

In the biographical interviews, the period of social changes of the early 1990s serves as the critical point to which personal time schemes are anchored and with respect to which they take on their meaning. The interviews with unlucky respondents display particularly sharp contrast between the two parts of the biographical narrative—"before" and "after" the transition, with the latter part as a period of either relative stabilization or further destabilization of their conditions. Yet interviews with both relatively lucky and unlucky respondents comprise a considerable number of positive representations of the previous system of social support which, despite its restrictions and rigidity, provided social guarantees, a sense of stability, and definite perspective on the future. These representations are situated on the spatiotemporal

axis “now” versus “then,” where the two poles are in a contrastive relation. The representations of the past are often half-veiled or introduced indirectly, by contrast. Respondents’ speech alone is insufficient to interpret the social representations: the analyst should rely on his/ her knowledge of the context and the process of inference to arrive at an interpretation.

*Interviewee* [female teacher]: I think that the education system was much simpler and better in the Soviet time, and children were much more taken care of since all children were equal indeed.

The respondent also mentions school uniform, free lunches, cheap guided tours and hobby circles for pupils as examples of “care about children” in the system of state support. Other respondents mention high incomes and bonuses in collective farms, broader opportunities to satisfy their cultural needs (e.g. to visit museums and concerts), as well as maximum employment in the past. In these cases, the past provides a positive background against which the meaning of social changes and reforms is measured.

The temporal scheme of a life-story is structured from the perspective of the present. As a rule, the stories of the unlucky respondents are focused on the contrastive relations between present and past. In the stories of the respondents who perceive their present condition as relatively stable or an improvement on previous conditions, presumable tensions between the present and the future are foregrounded: the future is often represented as a source of anxiety. Both successful and unsuccessful respondents express concern about further changes that may threaten their relative stability. The desire to maintain stability prompts the interviewees to avoid definite prognoses for the future, or to limit the scope of prognostication.

*Interviewee* [male owner of a small company; on the European regulations, which threaten small companies]: This is the most troublesome issue at the moment, that there is no chance to develop a small enterprise in the same way, which is actually the source of income for many families [...] This is the problem which does not leave in peace neither on day nor at night [...] It’s a very, very sad future.

Finally, successful respondents tend to concentrate on the present and its advantages. Thus, a woman who studied economy in Tallinn Pedagogical Institute spent a year in Vienna as a guest student studying law and international relations, worked as an economist, employee in a lawyer’s office and currently works as a freelance translator, considers her present situation quite satisfactory. She admits that her work has its benefits and drawbacks, yet appreciates first of all the opportunity to freely dispose of her own time and be her own master while having a relatively stable income. When asked about the future, she reflects that while planning can be helpful, she has no formulated or definite plans and is “open to life”:

On the one hand, I am myself open to life; on the other, to arrive somewhere it is good to know where do you want to arrive. At the same time, it works best of all for me this way. But this propaganda machine today, that one need[s] to know everything, how and by what means ... Every person has a different road...

The narrative scheme with the prevalence of the present and indeterminacy of the future is not only a manifestation of respondent’s satisfaction with the present situation, but the way to oppose the ideology of success and achievement based on

the “futuristic” model of progressive development according to which every successive step towards the future depreciates the value of previous states. Thus, certain mistrust for the future or propensity to limit the future is common for both lucky and unlucky respondents.

In sum, both successful and unsuccessful respondents often experience difficulties in maintaining the continuity of time schemes and reconciling past, present and future. The joint construction of the past and the future from the perspective of the present is a basis for a coherent biographical narrative (see e.g. Ricoeur 1984). The critical, disruptive events did, however, have an impact on the biographical construction. As a result, temporal schemes with a prevalent past and/or present dominate in the biographical interviews.

### ***Evaluations: social change and discourse modality.***

The conversation model provides a more flexible framework for a study of interpretations and explanations than the causal attribution theory often employed in the quantitative research. In the framework of the conversation model, causal attribution is recast as the identification of alternative states of affairs or counterfactuals (Antaki 1994: 28-29). Alternative event-descriptions introduce implicit causality, which sometimes surfaces in the form of modal or grammatical contrasts, e.g. alethic, deontic, axiological or epistemic constraints (Fairclough 2003: 164-180).

Interviewees employ a combination of factual and counterfactual explanations (alternative event-descriptions) as a means to resolve the conflict between intentions (desires, beliefs) and external or internal constraints, as they experience financial hardships and perceive themselves to be economically disadvantaged, but also claim commitment to profession and do not complain about their choices.

Let us take as an example an interview with a teacher who belongs to the “risk group” of single mothers. In her biographical narrative, the choice of profession is represented as culturally stipulated, motivated by love of literature and books as well as the inspiring example of her own school teacher. Social ties (classmates, course-mates, and friends who have chosen the same profession) are listed as another important choice factor. From this perspective, the choice is represented as voluntary and axiologically valuable. However, while considering alternative unrealized possibilities of life-events, the interviewee indicates the restrictions imposed on her life by the Soviet social system and represents her choice of job rather as compulsive or necessary:

The choice of profession... If one was not compelled to follow the job assignment at the time... I had an assignment and I had to stay at the same place for 3 years, otherwise I would have never gone to school.

Interviewer’s question about the opportunities of changing jobs later makes the interviewee check on counterfactual versions to substantiate her choice and indicate the limits of her possibilities. She argues that although her childhood dream of being an agronomist has never come true, that is best, since such a profession is useless nowadays. Similarly, unwillingness to lose social guarantees and lack of necessary qualifications (e.g. knowledge of English) prevented her from becoming a secretary in a private company. Finally, the respondent resorts to the fatalistic factors that have determined the course of her life: “I was lucky;” “it just happened so;” “[it] all happened as if it was predetermined;” etc. In essence, the absence of choice or unwillingness to change the job is explained fatalistically.

In sum, the interviewee represents her situation as a result of (1) voluntary and conscious choice of profession that was valorized as “good” or “valuable” in the social and cultural context where the interviewee belonged at the moment of choice (axiological constraints); (2) an unavoidable necessity or obligation when considered against the other, alternative choices (alethic and deontic constraints); (3) a result of coincidence of personal intentions and action of fate or providence (alethic and epistemic constraints; the unknown or inaccessible processes are ascribed to supernatural powers).

Interviewees, whose qualifications are not sufficient to provide them a satisfactory position at the job market, tend to explain their condition solely in terms of alethic and deontic constraints (possibility/ impossibility, obligation) and to consider counterfactual event-descriptions as axiologically more valuable. For example, an interviewee who used to work as a shop-girl, a cloak-room attendant and currently works at a clothing factory, regrets missing the opportunity of entering the system of higher education to study mathematics and computer science as she had earlier planned:

First, I think, life would be more interesting now, the level of life would be different, the level of communication would be different than it is now. It would be probably more interesting [...] Had I entered [high school], the contacts... life would be more interesting. Currently it is dull, boring, monotonous.

Here, counterfactual event-descriptions are used (1) to elucidate a combination of constraints and intentions that determine choice of profession or life path that leads to the present condition; (2) as a positive or negative background against which the choices are measured. The alternative event-descriptions provide the opportunity of “re-playing” the past choices, of their *aposteriori* justification or condemnation and, thus, partial compensation for the discontinuity of temporal schemas and impossibility of establishing coherent links among past, present and future.

### ***Self-representation and management of identity in disruptive circumstances***

While approaching the problem of identity in the biographical interviews, we take the conversation-analytic perspective on identity famously developed in Harvey Sacks’ early work and adopted in Antaki and Widdicombe (1998). From conversation-analytic perspective, identity is a result of indexical and occasioned casting of a person into a category with “category-bound features,” relevant and procedurally consequential to people’s interactions (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998: 3). Thus, identity becomes related to the whole conversational configuration and varies from one situation to the next. The biographical interviews display narrative management of biographically disruptive events that destabilized speakers’ identities. In this case the “occasioned construction of identity” is a response both to the critical events and to the necessity of their narrativization in the biographical interview.

The interviews with unsuccessful respondents are particularly symptomatic in this respect: they show how people forced to cope with a low standard of living or social failure maintain their social “face” in the situation of interaction (see Goffman 1967). Sociologists call the phenomenon of adaptation to the low standard of life the paradox of the “satisfied poor” (Kutsar 1995: 37-38). It should be emphasized, however, that the posture of resignation or adaptation is often implemented as a contextual strategy of “face” preservation and impression management—that is, as



part of social performance. Discourse analysis may reveal this posture's provisional and defensive character.

The interviews display that imagined stability and "voluntary poverty," as reactions to rapid changes and inability to cope with such changes, may be manifestations of different social masks or "faces" and, as such, may be connected to different strategies of self-representation. The "change" is perceived as undesirable and therefore suppressed or superseded into the area of counterfactual statements. Construction of the actual state of affairs is aimed at maintaining and legitimizing self-consistency of a storyteller: "In the act of storytelling, participants to human interaction are supposed to give a consistent picture of themselves as characters." Life-story telling is a form of face protection (Alasuutari 1997: 9, 11). We distinguish three main types of self-representation and "face protection" characteristic of the unlucky interviewees.

1. First, respondents may be dissatisfied with low income and limited opportunities for participation in social life, its traditions and customs, yet they may appreciate the relative stability of their condition and prefer it to any changes, for better or for worse. In this case, the actual state of affairs is conceptualized as neutral as compared with the alternative description of a further hypothetical regress:

*Interviewee* [female laboratory assistant]: Who knows how to change, in what direction. It may have been worse, if I changed.

*Interviewer*: Are you afraid of losing your job now?

*Interviewee* [female tailor]: In principle not, because there are many clothing factories around. We would find [the one]. The only fear is that the wages will be even lower, and I won't be able to do everything what I did before, when growing older. This is the fear I have.

[...] There are practically no desires, significant desires. I know it won't be better. One must stick to it [the present situation] and not to slip down.

*Interviewee* [female production controller; on her work in "Elcoteq"]: What is good here is that I have a job at the moment and am even paid something for it. Only to have the means for existence. ["Elcoteq" is a company that offers low-paying jobs.]

The interviewee recognizes his/ her condition as socially and economically disadvantaged, yet has no intention to change it and interprets it as relatively satisfactory.

2. Second, the attitude of "voluntary poverty" may serve as a strategy of idealized self-representation. Performance as self-representation of an individual before a particular set of observers is based on a "working consensus"; that is, it is "socialized", molded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented" (Goffman 1959: 35). As such, it embodies the accepted values of the society and presents a slightly idealized view of the self and the situation. From this point of view, the relatively poor respondents are forced to justify their situation and defend their self-dignity, referring to their situation as a result of free choice. This strategy of self-preservation may be termed "stoic performance." The following respondent is a medical orderly in a care treatment hospital section, where many dying patients are treated. She does hard work for a very small monthly salary [2000 crowns; about 127 euros]. In the 1990s, she worked at a low-paying job at a shoe factory. Asked about things that might have had an impact on her life, she

says, “I wouldn’t say that something has influenced me. All decisions I’ve made, I’ve made them myself.”

*Interviewer:* How have the recent changes in Estonia influenced your life?

*Interviewee:* All has gone more or less smoothly, I don’t see anything that would have awfully influenced me. Perhaps more travelling, more movement is seen now, there was a desire [to travel] in Russian time, but I’m not a big traveller after all to awfully wish to go somewhere. Should one invite [me to travel], even then I would think before.

[When asked about her salary: How one can cope with that?] We use to joke that if we had a lot [of money], we could hardly cope so well. And we’re doing well [...] I’ve not died from starvation yet, and I wouldn’t say I am underfed [...] I never say I’m doing bad. Let it be bad, I’m still well. You think that all’s going well, and it’ll go.

Explanation of certain way of life as the result of individual choice (“I was not sacked, I resigned myself;” “I’ve made all my decisions myself”) is in obvious contradiction with the interviewee’s references to the absence of choice as the actual cause of her actions (low-paying job, no spare money to travel, very modest nutrition habits, etc.).

An unemployed man describes his position at the labor market as almost desperate, yet nevertheless, when asked about his choice of profession (military building school, a too-narrow specialty that became useless in the new economic situation, and a cause of respondent’s inability to find a job), he justifies this choice and considers it a source of moral dignity:

I think that otherwise I wouldn’t have a character like that. I think I would have been much weaker had I not entered the military school. I think it wasn’t a bad choice. Perhaps not the best choice, but not a bad one, indeed. It gives a lot.

3. Finally, respondents who claim commitment to their profession and are inclined to see it as mission (e.g. a teacher, a medical nurse) but are dissatisfied with an income level they perceive as close to poverty typically show certain ambivalence in their self-descriptions. They are inclined to justify their choices and life-paths as compared with counterfactual event-descriptions, yet are dissatisfied with their present conditions and view themselves as victims of social injustice. Such respondents are also inclined to assume a *collective identity*: a generalized subject (the noun designating a representative of the profession, such as “teacher,” “nurse” etc.; the plural form of the first-person subject pronoun, the generalized form of the second-person pronoun or the impersonal “one”) is a rather typical means of their discursive positioning and self-representation.

For instance, the aforementioned teacher, who claims to be loyal to her profession and high standard of teaching, argues that her income is not in accordance with her social status and qualifications. She cannot afford to realize her cultural and educational needs, e.g. to visit theatre or cinema, to travel, to subscribe to newspapers—a condition she conceptualizes as “poverty”:

A *teacher* might visit theatre to see what children saw, might read those books, watch those movies. It would be nice to travel... *You* need a kind of ... charisma in *teacher’s position*, so that *your personality* would attract them, to be able to influence them.

When bringing forward different motivations for choosing her profession (pedagogical mission, obligation, necessity, fate, etc.), she claims that her qualifications and qualities do not bring her due reward in the present social system (“the state does not valorize my work and qualifications”):

And what is the most abusing is a too large amount of work [...] It exhausts emotionally, psychically and physically [...] I feel myself abused, the abuse of poverty is an endless torment since it exhausts. You can cope, survive... Yes, I know I live better than some people, yet in this position and at this level of education I think I deserve more, so that I could give more as well..

Another example is a hospital nurse, whose narrative reveals that people experienced poverty before the reforms as well, yet in her opinion there were more opportunities to cope with it on the local level:

Well, there was a decent hospital here in Russian time, and when this reformation of hospitals began... it was turned into a recovery treatment hospital, we had decent sections up to this time, we had, well, a separate section of inner diseases, we had a separate section of neurology, we had a separate children’s section... and when this, you know, reformation and all this stuff began, everything, you know, fell apart, then we felt most of all sorry... the children’s section was very valuable for *our* local hospital, because we, how to say, perhaps it was wrong, but there is a lot of unemployed people in *our* region, and in the families, where children got ill, and mother cannot buy a medicine – she just has no money for this... we just took the child to the hospital and the child got treatment and opportunity to be in a warm room... and once this was taken away from us, these children were just left [without care]...

In her narrative, the nurse uses the two types of collective identity: the institutional “we” (people of certain profession) and the “we” as members of local community (in “our” region). In the narratives of dissatisfied or unlucky respondents, the collective or institutional “we” refers to a disempowered social subject whose rights or capacities are restricted by anonymous agents of social changes.

We might label three delineated types of discursive self-representation and defensive strategies employed by unlucky respondents economically disadvantaged by social changes the “*resigned loser*,” “*satisfied*” or “*stoic loser*,” and “*dissatisfied (revolting) loser*.”

In sum, structural changes in the society that have the most significant impact on respondents’ lives occupy a prominent position in the biographical interviews. Individual factors leading to social failure or success are rather downplayed. Only 3 of 32 interviewees mentioned individual characteristics that had a negative impact on their destiny: a female who refers to her husband’s temporary gambling addiction that caused financial hardships in the family, and two Russian-speaking respondents who refer to their poor knowledge of the Estonian language as restricting their chances at the labor market. Unlucky respondents sometimes refer to their inability, unwillingness or the impossibility of their using the new social situation as virtual causes of social failure. The interviews show that the condition subjectively perceived as poverty may be converted to a positive value providing stability, relative control over one’s own life or feeling of commitment to a profession (vocation) and may become a source of moral satisfaction. Relative control over one’s own destiny is often preferred to success and achievement. Both structural and individual factors are often endowed with a fatalistic meaning. The social agents and processes are not

clearly identified or analyzed; as a rule, the processes are represented and perceived as anonymous and the agents backgrounded or omitted. These discursive strategies are characteristic of both relatively lucky and unlucky respondents' self-descriptions. Insofar as the motivations of respondents' behavior or causes of their condition are obscured, it is difficult to single out definite biographical motifs (e.g. types of "right behavior" or thinking) that would necessarily lead to success or allow avoiding failure.

## Summary

In their biographical narratives, interviewees foreground structural changes as having the most significant impact on their lives and the life of the society. The period of social changes (the 1990s) serves as the horizon with respect to which biographical facts take on their meaning. Both relatively lucky and unlucky interviewees implicitly or explicitly highlight social stress and difficulties in adaptation to social change. Other important regularities are the representation of social processes as anonymous, backgrounding of agency, and a modest role ascribed to the individual in the period of transition and later. The social actor's role is often reduced to the ability to use, benefit or suffer from the situation. A number of respondents feel themselves to be excluded from the sphere of social decision-making and therefore prefer relative stability and control over their lives to success and achievement.

Both successful and unsuccessful respondents represent the period of social changes as a critical, disruptive experience. Their interviews display certain difficulties in maintaining the continuity of time schemes, in linking the past, present and future and, thus in producing a coherent biographical narrative. Evaluations of the condition subjectively perceived as social failure or poverty by the interviewees are ambivalent: as a rule, they mark both negative and positive aspects of this condition. Relative control over one's own life and a feeling of relative stability are often valorized above social success. The high appraisal of self-sufficiency and relative control over one's own destiny is common for both relatively lucky and unlucky interviewees. If the former are dissatisfied with low incomes and hard job, the latter sometimes feel that their qualifications are higher than needed in their position or the job conditions are too sensitive to social and political factors. However, even if the job does not meet their expectations, respondents most often prefer stable income and commitment to changes. The less successful respondents either employ defensive strategies of self-positioning, representing themselves as "voluntary" or "satisfied poor," or refer to collective identity to explain social failure or insecurity. Alternative (counterfactual) event-descriptions provide the opportunity for respondents to "re-play" past choices and thus partially compensate for the discontinuity of temporal schemas, inconsistencies in identity management and the impossibility of constructing a coherent biographical narrative.

The interviews display that the "victory" of "winners" has been relative: a number of them experience financial hardships, perceive their income as insufficient to satisfy their social and cultural needs, or refer to the decrease in control over their own lives. The analysis of the biographical narratives has also disclosed the strategies that respondents use to cope with social challenges as well as discontinuities and disruptions that serve as symptoms of difficulties respondents have experienced or continue to experience in their efforts to overcome their socio-economic situations.

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